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By James Lynch

Iowa National Guard members have begun to receive long-overdue payments they were promised for extended tours of Iraq, 1st District U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley announced Thursday.

"The news that Iowa's National Guard members are finally receiving the respite leave payments they earned is both exciting and long overdue," Braley said. "Hundreds of Iowa National Guard members bravely served our country and waited patiently to be compensated."

Braley and other members of the Iowa congressional delegation have been working for the past two years to see that Guard members get the respite leave benefits they earned on lengthy deployments.

Guard members are beginning to receive up to \$200 a day from the Post-Deployment/Mobilization Respite Absence program, commonly known as "respite leave." It was promised by the Department of Defense for those soldiers who served beyond their scheduled deployments. Department protocols call for Guard members to serve no more than one year in five. The idea was to provide service members who were deployed beyond established rotation cycles additional time to reintegrate into civilian life, as well as to help with retention of service members who had experienced long tours.

In Iowa, most of the guardsmen owed respite leave belong to the 1-133rd Infantry. It was deployed for 22 months, including approximately 16 months in Iraq ending in July 2007. It

includes units in Waterloo, Dubuque, Oelwein, Iowa Falls and Charles City.

Braley has been leading efforts in the U.S. House to fix the back-pay problem and ensure that thousands of troops nationwide receive proper compensation. His Guaranteed Benefits for Our Troops Act (HR 1222) was signed into law in October as part of the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act and enables the Pentagon to release the promised benefits.

Because of a delay between the announcement of the respite leave program by the Department of Defense and the implementation of the program by the individual services, an estimated 22,000 Army National Guard troops across the country did not receive proper compensation. The majority of affected troops nationwide are expected to be paid by March 19.